Suffering and Becoming Holy: Insights from John Wesley's Pastoral Counsel

BY ADMIN | JULY 3, 2020 | 0

By Mark K. Olson. Abstract: The problem of human suffering has conflicted many people. The eighteenth century was no different, for it was rife with suffering and death, with the average life span a short 37 years. John Wesley was moved by the suffering he saw. around him opening medical clinics in London and Bristol. He understood that our suffering is rooted in Adam's Fall but that God's redemptive work is a process of healing and restoration. But he also saw suffering as one of the means God uses to sanctify his people. This article explores how he counseled people to see the work of God in their sufferings.

Introduction

If there is one area in life in which people struggle, it is to find purpose and meaning when faced with human suffering. In John Wesley's later years, he counseled many seekers of perfect love on how to understand their physical and emotional pain as a means to attaining holiness of heart and life. By looking at how Wesley counseled these seekers we can gain important insights into how he understood human suffering in relation to his views on Christian perfection. As we proceed, the reader might be surprised by some of the views Wesley held regarding human suffering and the active role God takes in our sufferings. But before we explore these things we first need to survey sickness and suffering in eighteenth-century Britain.

Suffering in the Eighteenth Century

In the eighteenth century life expectancy rates were quite low compared to our modern industrialized societies. Keith Thomas summarized the situation that in early modern England "poverty, ill health, and premature death stunted innumerable lives."[1] Roy Porter concurred in his description of eighteenth-century English society. Death rates were especially high among the very young. Approximately one fifth of all babies died their first year, and about one in three never made it past age five.[2] Parish records confirm that in some areas around London up to three out of four children perished before the age of six.[3] Yet, in spite of these high mortality rates the population of England in the early 1700s tilted toward the young. Over half of the population was under the age of twenty-one, and the average life-span was a short thirty-seven years. The biggest killers were various fevers, like typhus, dysentery, measles, and influenza.[4] Industrial diseases were also rife. Silicosis plagued potters, cancers succumbed chimney sweepers, lead poisoning afflicted paint-makers, and rheumatism hampered farm laborers, while the poor suffered from scurvy and rickets. The wealthy were not immune either. Gout and dropsy crippled many hard-drinking squires, while cosmetic poisoning defaced many of the fashionable ladies.[5] Porter added that for the "bulk of the population toil, deprivation, uncertainty, and suffering was the reality of daily life."[6] To sum up the situation, in the eighteenth century suffering was everyone's lot sooner or later. Physical pain was the great leveler in society, for rich and for poor; and with few anesthetics to abate pain, alcohol being the best, people simply learned to cope with disease, pain, and suffering.[7]

John Wesley's Response

With the amount of suffering so great within the general society, it is no surprise that Wesley took an interest in the healing business. In 1746 the Methodists opened medical clinics in Bristol and London to help those who had no access to professional health care. The next year Wesley published *Primitive Physic*, a practical guide of healing remedies that went through twenty-three editions in his lifetime. At first, 93 diseases were treated, arranged in alphabetical order. By the last edition in 1791 the scope of the work had grown to 288 diseases with 824 remedies. Deborah Madden explained that Wesley's interest in health issues developed out of his Anglican heritage and Oxford education.[8] Ministerial training in the eighteenth century included the study of medicine, and at times the Church licensed priests to practice medicine as part of their ministry.[9] She added that Wesley's holistic attitude toward human nature and healing was also inspired by his study of primitive Christianity. According to Madden, Wesley held several core beliefs about disease and health:

1. Human nature and healing are inextricably linked.
2. Humans are a unity of body, mind, and soul, but that health in each area is not necessarily the same.
3. Physical ailments should be treated primarily with physical remedies.
4. Original sin does not include the belief that sickness is divine punishment.
5. God is merciful and redemptive in character and work.[10]

Madden also noted that Wesley's empirical, experimental approach to medicine led him to steer away from approaches that were speculative and abstruse.[11] And it is Wesley's pragmatic approach that comes through in his pastoral counseling.

John Wesley's Diagnosis

When we turn to the various ailments Wesley addressed in his letters, we are confronted with the sober reality that in the eighteenth century so little was known of the underlying causes of disease. As a consequence, when Wesley addressed health issues in his letters he did so in mostly general terms. Even so, he did distinguish between mental and emotional disorders on the one hand, and bodily or physical ailments on the other. These two general categories are evident in the most common ailments he mentions. In the former category are "nervous disorders,"[12] a broad label for various kinds of mental and emotional distresses. In the second category he speaks of "weakness of body,"[13] "infirmity,"[14] and "pain."[15] Problems with depression appear fairly often among the women to whom Wesley conversed,[16] while other labels include "inward" and "outward" trials,[17] various "wants," and "weaknesses."[18] These examples illustrate how Wesley spoke of various illnesses and present a window into some of the ailments early Methodists suffered from and which Wesley addressed in his counseling.

When it came to diagnosing the causes of disease Wesley took a two-prong approach. As Madden noted, Wesley addressed illness and suffering from an empirical, experimental perspective. From his list of strategies for good health—diet, sleep, cleanliness, exercise, air quality, maintaining regular bowel movements, and regulating the passions—we can infer that Wesley understood that one of the causes of disease, and hence suffering, was practical: the failure to live a wholesome, health-conscious lifestyle.[19] But it is his theological explanations for disease that illuminates his belief in the sanctifying value of human suffering.

In keeping with his times, Wesley saw the root cause of disease and suffering in largely theological categories. Both God and Satan are active in our world, and consequently both are active in human suffering. To Hannah Ball Wesley diagnosed, "It cannot be doubted but your heaviness was owing in part to diabolical agency."[20] He then added, "Satan sometimes by God's permission weakens the body." Although Satan can afflict and induce suffering, even in the children of God, Wesley held firm it is God who directs all things in the believer's life. He alone ordains what enters one's life and he alone knows what

is best for each individual's salvation and sanctification.[21] As Wesley told Miss March, "How wise are all the ways of God! And although in many instances they are past finding out, yet we may even now discern the designs of his providence."[22] For Wesley, central to God's designs is his purpose to sanctify his people in "all happiness and holiness."[23]

Besides the unerring hand of providence[24], Wesley looked to Adam's fall to explain human suffering. On several occasions Wesley alluded to Paul's phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:7—"we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (KJV)—to illustrate our susceptibility to sickness and disease in the present age. As Wesley explained to Elizabeth Hardy, even those perfected in love "dwell in a shattered, corruptible body" so that their thoughts, words, and actions are never "precisely right."[25] In the preface of *Primitive Physic* Wesley explained himself more thoroughly:

"When man came first out of the hands of the great Creator…with immortality and incorruption, there was no place for physic, or the art of healing. As he knew no sin, so he knew no pain, no sickness, weakness, or bodily disorder…But since man rebelled against the Sovereign of heaven and earth, how entirely is the scene changed!…The seeds of weakness and pain, of sickness and death, are now lodged in our inmost substance; whence a thousand disorders continually spring, even without the aid of external violence."[26]

Suffering and Becoming Holy

By linking human sickness and pain to Adam's transgression, Wesley not only acknowledged that human suffering is inescapable in the present age, he also laid the foundation for understanding the value of human suffering in the redemptive process of restoring Adam's race to holiness in Christ. This value is best appreciated by listing several of the benefits Wesley identified regarding suffering and becoming holy:

- Suffering keeps the believer humble, even as a little child.[27]
- Suffering alters the believer's focus, from this world and toward God.[28]
- Suffering teaches the believer obedience, just as it did for Christ.[29]
- Suffering cultivates an attitude of full submission toward God.[30]
- Suffering increases our earnestness for pure love.[31]
- Suffering prepares the believer to fight temptation.[32]

The general rule Wesley set down is this: "Whatever raises the mind to God is good; whatever draws the heart from its center is evil." He then went on to exhort Lady Maxwell, "You have accordingly found pain, sickness, bodily weakness, to be real goods; as bringing you nearer and nearer to the fountain of all happiness and holiness."[33] Although suffering can bring discouragement for a season and damp one's joy in the Lord,[34] Wesley continually counseled those who suffered that if their affliction moves them closer to God then it has sanctifying value in their lives. As a consequence, Wesley affirmed over and over to those who suffered that (1) God does ordain suffering in order to perfect his people, and (2) the believer must interpret their afflictions as one of God's means to make them holy in Christ:

"My Dear Lady Maxwell…He [God] has given you affliction upon affliction; He has used every possible means to unhinge your soul from things of earth, that it might fix on Him alone."[35]

"My Dear Sister [Ann Bolton]…Fear nothing; only believe. He is with you in the fire so that the flames shall not kindle upon you. O how will you praise Him by-and-by for His wise and gracious visitation! He is purging away all your dross, that you may be a vessel meet for the Master's use. Happy are they that

do His will, and happier still they that suffer doing it. But whatever you suffer, cast not away that confidence, which hath great recompense of reward. In order to keep it, do not reason, but simply look up to Him that loves you. Tell Him as a little child all your wants."[36]

But how did Wesley see the relationship between suffering and Christian perfection? First, he did not believe suffering to be incompatible with the "highest degree of holiness."[37] To the contrary, since the only thing essential to sanctification is a "will steadily and uniformly devoted to God," then "perfection is consistent with a thousand nervous disorders" and other ailments.[38] Simply stated, human suffering need not divert the heart away from God; therefore, it is compatible with the highest state of grace in this life. Second, Wesley affirmed two kinds or levels of perfection. One is attainable in this life; the other is not. What is attainable is a love free from sinful tempers; what is not attainable is an absolute perfection in which no flaws remain.[39] Since Wesley defined perfection according to the first category—perfect love—then logically he saw suffering, even intense suffering, as compatible with becoming holy in Christ. As we will see below, some of the holiest saints were those who experienced suffering in their lives.

When it came to attaining perfection, Wesley was very clear that God can use pleasure as well as pain to sanctify his people. However, a number of early Methodists thought otherwise. Wesley tackled this issue head on with his housekeeper Miss March:

"You seem to think pain, yea, much pain, must go before an entire cure. In Sarah Ryan it did, and in a very few others. But it need not: pain is no more salutary than pleasure. Saving grace is essentially such; saving pain but accidentally. When God saves us by pain rather than pleasure, I can resolve it only into his justice, or sovereign will. To use the grace we have, and now to expect all we want, is the grand secret."[40]

Part of the secret for those who suffer was for them to focus on Christ and not their sufferings to perfect their holiness, for it is faith alone in Christ alone that sanctifies. As he exhorted Lady Maxwell who believed one must pass through much pain to become holy, "The word is nigh thee! 'Only believe!' Look unto Jesus! Be thou saved!"[41] At another time he encouraged her, "I do not doubt but he is gradually working in you; but I want you to experience, likewise, an instantaneous work."[42] Wesley recognized that for those facing chronic pain, physical and/or emotional, the temptation is to believe that pain, even intense pain, is what God requires to make the heart holy and pure. Wesley affirmed just the opposite. If faith is the sole condition for God to sanctify the heart, then pain and pleasure are incidental to the instantaneous work of sanctifying grace.

Wesley even went a step further. He insisted that to require that one must suffer in order to be sanctified is to teach salvation by "works of the law." His argument was that to teach the necessity of suffering was to require a certain period of time and this in effect placed a limit on the power of God.[43] Such a view was anathema to Wesley's position on free grace and the sovereignty of God. After all, if God is sovereign and all-powerful, then he can save in the moment as well as over time. Instead of focusing on their pain, Wesley encouraged those who suffer to assume the attitude of Christ. "Everything is a blessing, a means to holiness," he told Mrs. Fletcher, "as long as you can clearly say, 'Lord, do with me and mine what thou wilt, and when thou wilt, and how thou wilt.'"[44] Just as Jesus surrendered his will to the will of his Father, those who suffer must follow his example and surrender their wills to the will of their Father, knowing that his only motive is to perfect them in his pure love. This was the heartbeat of Wesley's counsel to those under his pastoral care. Those who suffer need to draw encouragement from the example of Christ when he surrendered himself completely to his Father in the garden in preparation for the cross. In this way the believer learns to have the mind of Christ about all things, including their sufferings.

Besides having an attitude of submission and surrender, Wesley counseled those who suffer to give thanks for their sickness and pain as well as for their recovery, for God is the one who "orders all things well."[45] Christians are to "walk closely to God"[46] and place their trust in him when they feel "hedged in on every side."[47] If believers maintain a positive attitude, like Jesus did when he faced suffering and death, then they too can "improve by everything that occurs: by good or ill success, so called; by sickness or health, by ease or pain."[48] Underlying this counsel was the firm belief that God alone knows what is best for the individual, and this includes the pain we experience in this life.[49] Yet, for Wesley the sovereignty of God had become so tempered by the love of God that those who suffer no longer need to fear God's sovereign will in their lives. Instead, they could now find solace in the truth that their pain has

divine purpose: God is purging the believer from the dross of this world and perfecting them in his pure love. So even when facing death with much pain, those who suffer can witness the "good confession," and pass from this life with a "full assurance of hope."[50]

Closing: Example of Jane Cooper

Among the early Methodists who exemplified this radiant hope in the face of great suffering, was that "lovely saint, Jane Cooper."[51] Wesley was so impressed with her demeanor, her attitude, her spirituality in the face of intense suffering (small pox) that he shared her death-bed testimony in his classic work on holiness, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*. In her final days she kept singing the following words:

When pain o'er this weak flesh prevails,
*With lamb-like patience arm my breast.****[52]***

Gathering strength from her faith in the face of death and great suffering, Jane repeatedly confessed, "Lord, I bless thee, that thou art ever with me, and all thou hast is mine. Thy love is greater than my weakness, greater than my helplessness, greater than my unworthiness."[53] Even though in her final hours she experienced "strong convulsions" and her suffering was "extreme," she loved Jesus to her last breath. Her final words before passing were "My Jesus is all in all to me. Glory be to him through time and eternity."[54]

Wesley included Jane's testimony in the *Plain Account* because she not only embodied everything he taught about Christian perfection, but her testimony expressed so succinctly the sanctifying value of suffering for the believer. At one point in her testimony, Miss Cooper summed up Wesley's theology of suffering and becoming holy, "I suffer the will of Jesus. All he sends is sweetened by His love."[55]

---

[1] Keith Thomas, *The Ends of Life: Roads to Fulfillment in Early Modern England* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 13.

[2] Roy Porter, *English Society in the 18th Century*, *Revised Edition* (London: Penguin Books, 1982, 1990, 1991), 13.

[3] Ibid., 13.

[4] Ibid., 13.

[5] Ibid., 14.

[6] Ibid., 15.

[7] Ibid., 16.

[8] Deborah Madden, "Wesley as advisor on health and healing," in Randy L. Maddox and Jason E. Vickers eds. *The Cambridge Companion to John Wesley*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 176-89.

[9] Ibid., 181.

[10] Ibid., 182.

[11] Ibid., 182.

[12] John Telford, *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, 8 vols.London: Epworth Press, 1931 (Hereafter: Telford), 4:188 (9/15/62); 5:132 (4/24/69), 182 (2/17/70); 7:197 (11/21/83).

[13] Ibid., 3:208 (12/22/56); see also "bodily weakness" 4:252 (7/10/64); "weak body" 4:135 (12/30/74).

[14] Ibid., 5:42 (2/23/67), 134 (4/29/69).

[15] Ibid., 4:100; see "saving pain" 4:313; Thomas Jackson, *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984 (Hereafter: *Works*, Jackson), 12: 284.

[16] Ibid., 3:208 (12/22/56); 5:267 (7/13/71); 6:135 (12/30/74).

[17] Ibid., 5:95 (7/5/68), 305 (2/8/72).

[18] Ibid., 5:200 (9/15/70).

[19] Madden, 185-86.

[20] Telford 6:27 (5/23/73).

[21] Ibid., 5:182 (2/17/70), 270 (8/3/71); 7:316 (2/21/86).

[22] Ibid., 5:270 (8/3/71); regarding human ignorance concerning God's dealings with us in this life, see 5:255-56 (5/31/71).

[23] Ibid., 5:134 (4/29/69).

[24] Ibid., 5:134 (4/29/69).

[25] Ibid., 4:167 (12/26/61).

[26] John Wesley, *Primitive Physic*, 22nd edition, Philadelphia: Parry Hall, 1791, iii-iv.

[27] Telford 4:55-56 (3/6/59).

[28] Ibid., 4:250-51 (6/20/64); 5:134 (4/29/69).

[29] Ibid., 7:45 (1/2/81).Wesley alludes to Hebrews 5:8 where it says Christ learned obedience from what he suffered.

[30] Ibid., 6:135 (12/30/74).

[31] Ibid., 5:182 (2/17/70).

[32] Ibid., 7:316 (2/21/86).

[33] Ibid., 5:134 (4/29/69).

[34] Ibid., 5:213 (12/15/70).

[35] Ibid., 4:250 (6/20/64).

[36] Ibid., 5:258 (6/15/71).

[37] Ibid., 5:6 (3/29/66).

[38] Ibid., 6:68 (1/18/74); see also 4:188 (9/15/62); 5:6, 56 (3/29/66, 7/25/67).

[39] Ibid., 4:167 (12/26/61); see also 4:155, 208 (6/7/61, 4/7/63).

[40] Ibid., 4:313 (10/13/65).

[41] Ibid., 5:11 (5/6/66).

[42] Ibid., 4:308 (7/5/65).

[43] Ibid., 4:300-01 (5/25/65); see also 4:268-69 (10/12/64).

[44] Ibid., 5:61 (8/16/67).

[45] Ibid., 7:316 (2/21/86).

[46] Ibid., 5:95 (7/5/68).

[47] Ibid., 6:7 (12/18/72).

[48] Ibid., 6:27 (5/23/73); see also 5:61, 182 (8/16/67, 2/17/70).

[49] Ibid., 5:182, 270-71 (2/17/70, 8/3/71); 6:329 (11/13/78).

[50] Ibid., 5:135 (5/69).

[51] Ibid., 6:140 (2/11/75); see also 5:135 (5/69).

[52] Mark K. Olson, ed. *John Wesley's 'A Plain Account of Christian Perfection': The Annotated Edition* (Fenwick: Alethea In Heart, 2005), 164.

[53] Ibid., 166.

[54] Ibid., 168.

[55] Ibid., 164.